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OPPORTUNITIES IN FAMILY CENTERED EXTENSION PROGRAMS

talk by

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You may question my competency to speak intelligently on "Opportunities in Family Centered Extension Programs." I must confess I am even unable to claim former membership in a 4-H Club for 4-H Clubs came to my county in Vermont after I left home. Nor have I ever been on an Extension payroll. Frankly, all I can offer in the way of credentials is a record as one of the most active unpaid extension workers in the State of Iowa. And whereas I know several of your Extension Staff personally, I know little about your Extension Program in Michigan. That may be fortunate or unfortunate, depending upon your point of view. At any rate, it means that my remarks this morning are directed necessarily to Extension programs in general rather than to the Michigan program in particular.

In education circles we periodically coin a new phrase or endow an ordinary word with a professional meaning; and for the moment at least--an impression is created that here is a fresh approach. At first, other educators are startled, and segments of the general population may be jolted by it. Before long, the new word or phrase becomes a popular expression--an integral part of the professional jargon. It is on everybody's tongue with as many shades of meaning as there are people using it. "Individual differences, home experiences, objectives, developmental levels" are a few that come to mind. You can add to the list I am sure. "Family centered" likewise is a much used, generally misunderstood phrase. It may help us think together this morning if I share with you my particular definition of it. "Family centered," as I use it, refers to a program centered on a good life for the family; on the configuration of all those things that may represent a good life for any particular family.

We all recognize that the Extension Service was established to take the results of research in agriculture and home economics from our Land Grant Colleges directly to the people. In the past eighty years since colleges in this central part of our country introduced those early Farmers' Institutes, specialists from the colleges and County Extension Agents have carried to the farmer much of the technical information developed at our Land Grant Colleges in an effort to help him improve his production of food and fiber. Concurrently, the home economics specialists and the County Home Demonstration Agents have brought to the farm homemakers research results to improve the home production of food, clothing, and shelter for the farm family. As our country expanded and distribution to rapidly growing urban areas became more complex, technical information on marketing of farm products came to be equally as important as production in the agricultural extension program. This task, too, has been and is now well performed by our several state Extension Services. In Iowa a corps of specialists from thirteen departments in agriculture and from five departments in home economics, together with a highly trained information staff, get the latest facts to farm folks as fast as the cautious research workers will release them. I am sure that happens in Michigan, too, possibly with more specialists representing even more departments.

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In order to adequately study the many facets of the farm and the home, we have divided both agriculture and home economics into many separate subject matter areas, and we have subdivided each subject matter area into smaller morsels for more intensive investigation. Such a procedure is mandatory, of course, in the early phase of developing a new field of study. It followed logically too that departments and divisions were created in our colleges to teach long series of courses in each of these separate subject-matter areas. Then the Extension Service began to employ men and women with special training in each branch of each subject matter to interpret these new findings to the farmer and the homemaker.

But the farmer's problem concerning the possible improvement of production in his dairy herd is not easily isolated as one of animal nutrition, brucellosis control, or the marketing of milk. It may include all of these, plus pasture management, crop rotation, fertilizers, farm structures, milking equipment and machinery, dairy management practices, production credit and a dozen others that come to your mind. Some needs of his family may enter the picture, too. The desire of all members of the family for running water in the house, the state of his wife's health, the need to accumulate money to send the oldest boy to college--any realistic decision made concerning improving the production of milk, must take into consideration the goals of the family; for after all, farm income is not an end in itself. It is primarily important as a means of better living for the farm family. No sound decision relating to the farm business can be made without a careful consideration of the goals of the farm family--what the family wants for its members over a period of years, which of those items have priority, which are important to attain right now. Is it more urgent that water be installed in the house, to ease the task of the homemaker who is chronically fatigued and is growing old before her time? Or is it better to invest in a new milking parlor to cut farm labor costs? Before decisions are made to invest more in the farm enterprise in order to increase farm income, the question of the potential use of that added income for increased satisfaction in family living must be apparent.

In addition to a clear-cut picture of goals of the family, the farmer requires access to a large assortment of miscellaneous bits of information before he can decide wisely on the exact steps that he should take to improve his particular situation. Those bits of information must be gathered from several different subject matter sources--agronomy, agricultural engineering, animal nutrition, dairy industry, agricultural economics--to name but a few--then the facts selected must be examined again in relation to the specific situation, and in relation to goals before a decision for a new practice can be made.

The farmer and his family need help in studying the problem as an integrated whole. They can get information on the disjointed parts of it from college bulletins, articles appearing in farm papers and magazines,

radio and television programs, short courses at the college, field days. They have access to these same sources for assistance in improving the health and comfort of family members. This need for help on the whole problem provides an opportunity for the Extension Service to assist by helping the farm family to integrate all these things for use in meeting their particular need.

It may seem to you that I am describing the program in farm and home development, or farm and home planning, or whatever term you are using in Michigan. And perhaps I am. I am avoiding such labels, because I have heard such a wide variety of activities classified under them that I am fearful they are becoming umbrella phrases that cover anything we happen to do in the name of extension. It is evident that we have carried fragmentation of knowledge relating to farming and homemaking beyond the point of usefulness to the individual farm family. Now the opportunity is ours to assume responsibility for fitting the pieces back into a meaningful whole for intelligent use by the farm family.

Your committee, in inviting me to participate in this program, asked that I speak on the subject of problems and methods as well as opportunities for family-centered programs. It is easy to point out the problems we encounter if we attempt to reorient our extension program in this direction of integration for use. The problems are many but they may be summarized as one which can be stated quite simply. We are all too specialized to know how to proceed. It is a little more difficult to speak of the matter of method or how we can carry it forward. This matter of method is a difficult one. However, if we are convinced that such a re-direction of effort is important, we will experiment with a variety of possible methods until we find one or more that works for us.

Obviously, we must start by forgetting our individual specialties, and working together to teach each other. All of us--men and women, county agricultural agents and county home demonstration agents, and supervisors, will have to learn something about home management and something about farm management. If we are really sincere in centering attention on family values and goals, then we will all have to learn more about human development and family relationships, too. And that means all of us--not that the home demonstration agent will only help on family relations and home management--and the county agent on farm management.

A really integrated family approach can occur only when both agents working with the family have the background to see the situation as a whole, and can help the family to study it with all its ramifications. Fortunately, there are prospective instructors in each of these three fields on our extension and resident staffs--so we have the resources for an inservice training program for those working with this problem. In Michigan you are fortunate to have a special Extension training program and staff to turn to for such assistance. Young farm families, trying to get a toe-hold through renting land or buying the home place are in acute need of this kind of assistance with a total problem. We might do well to focus the program on this group in the beginning, as we experiment with method.

Travelling with some Iowa friends through a mountain area in New England last summer, we came to a community that has built a reputation for itself by preserving some of the old-time customs of a New England village, and selling old-time products in a country store complete even to the cracker barrel. After we had stopped, we wandered over to the old grist mill where corn and wheat are stone ground for sale through the store. We found a beautifully preserved mill, with machinery in fine running condition, and the undershot water wheel placed one foot above the water level of the stream. It often seems that for the low-income farm family, our Extension Service Program is placed just about a foot above them, too. It is there--in the same community, but geared to serve the interests of the better financed, more alert farm families with the larger commercial enterprises. We now have what may be our last opportunity to make the necessary adjustments in our program to bring it to a level that will serve this group of low-income farm families. The opportunity has been ours these many years--and has been called to our attention periodically. Each time we have admitted our defectiveness, have talked about our need to do something, and have failed to develop an action program. We may not have another chance. Unless we in the Extension Service can produce evidence of real service to these people, we may expect to see a parallel agency established to do the job. The reason for our neglect of this important rural group can be enumerated easily:

- (1) Our own middle-class background with a value system so different from that of families in the so-called low socio-economic class that we cannot understand them, nor they us.
- (2) Our dependence for help in program planning on local Extension Councils or committees, with membership drawn from middle-class farm families.

In one of the small communities near my home, the local Extension Council decided to do something about this situation. The Council members made a house-to-house canvass, giving personal invitations to all the women to attend the home demonstration meetings. The canvass was successful, and 11 of the possible 27 women from low-income families attended the first meeting. But at the second meeting, a month later, not one of the 11 returned! Why? What had happened? First, the group had met in the home of one of the Council members, in the rumpus room, (that dates my story - last year the "recreation room," today it would be called the "family room") and not one of the 11 had a "rumpus room"--in fact, most of them did not have a living room, either. Then the lesson-demonstration by the local leader was on clothing renovation--and none of these women had clothing that was worth renovating, according to the standards set forth at this first meeting. This is only one illustration, and of a home economics program. I am sure similar incidents have occurred in attempts to work with low income farm men.

Studies of church membership and activity in church organizations in rural areas have revealed that rural people feel more comfortable in joining a group that is made up of members with economic and social status similar

to their own. Consequently, if there are three different Protestant churches in a rural area, the membership in each one tends to cluster around one socio-economic group. Then there are some families, often designated by the sociologists as belonging to the lower-lower socio-economic class, who resist any kind of meeting. They do not attend Church nor belong to any organized group for they are suspicious of any gathering that includes more than two visiting neighbors or relatives.

If we are to make a sincere attempt to work with the lower-income farm family, we will need

- (1) help from our rural sociologists in understanding, appreciating, and accepting these value systems so different from our own;
- (2) a new approach to local program planning which provides for planning with and for this group as well as with the higher-income families;
- (3) to experiment with ways of reaching that family that shuns meetings.

Dr. Hurd has pointed out the steady decline in our rural farm population, and the increasing rural non-farm population, which accompanies the urbanization of our society as a whole. A realistic look at such facts leads us to ask how much longer we can justify an Agricultural Extension Service? I note that Michigan is much ahead of many other states, in name at least, for you have dropped that prefix of "Agriculture". Certainly this shifting of our population balance provides us with some exciting opportunities for program development. Let us recognize and capitalize on this change of the family from a producing to a consuming unit.

In recent years we have done so well in our program for improvement of farm production that we find our No. 1 farm problem today to be one of finding real use for much of the food and fiber produced on the farms. While the farm organizations, the politicians and the top drawer U.S.D.A. officials work on the matter of subsidies and price supports--the Extension Service has an opportunity to devote its energy to reducing the farm surplus by working with families, urban and rural, on problems of consumption. For many of us, it means a change in our frame of reference from helping farmers to market their products successfully, to working with families as consumers, to help them get a better diet, improved health, and greater satisfaction for money spent for family living. Our city consumer information service program is a good beginning. But it is only a beginning. In too many instances (not Michigan, of course) it merely advertises the so-called abundant foods. A vigorous consumer education program centered on the family's needs rather than on the commodity to be marketed, would bring greater gains to both the family and the farmer.

In recent years we have emphasized understanding of public problems in our work with rural groups. If we will, we can now extend that effort to work with urban and rural non-farm folks as well, on matters of public policy.

In the years between the two world wars, there arose in this country a number of highly organized, special interest groups, each dedicated to promoting its own program with the State Legislature and with Congress. Farmers soon noted this trend and they, too, gradually developed their own organizations to promote their particular interests. All of these groups serve a very real purpose. However, by their very nature, they fail to recognize the intricate interrelationships of the various segments of our economy and the ultimate effect upon the entire population of the legislation enacted for any one group. Often they have acted so vigorously that those outside an organization have tended to look with suspicion on it and its demands.

We have heard, too, how men and women are becoming more and more dependent on their affiliations with large impersonal organizations for their social orientation. They no longer speak as individuals of their own ideas, but express the official position of an organization--be it the Farm Bureau, CIO, AMA, NEA, Chamber of Commerce, DAR, the Veterans of Foreign Wars. It is well to take note of this situation, and accept it. But at the same time, we must recognize that this trend, carried too far, can have disastrous results. If freedom of speech is to be preserved in this country, it is important that we provide some opportunity for people to think for themselves, and to express their personal viewpoints outside an organizational frame of reference.

The present merging of the urban and rural populations suggests that it is now physically possible for the family members oriented toward rural living to meet with urban-oriented families for the joint study of many kinds of public problems. It presents a challenge to the Extension Service to take action to bring together these families with a variety of occupational backgrounds and group affiliations, for free discussion. A well developed extension educational program on public problems could help urban groups understand the so-called farm problem; it could help both urban and rural folks see beyond the horizon of their individual vested interests to the fundamental problems and issues and the way in which decisions regarding public policy affect the welfare of all families.

We have been told that as the size of the family decreases, the quality of that family life becomes of major importance. Ironically, as the need for building family solidarity has grown, so have the forces that pull the family apart. The church, the club, the professional or labor organization pull Dad to one set of evening meetings, and Mother to another, while the school, the church, the Scouts or 4-H Club will pull each of the 1.6 to 2 children per family in still separate directions. Will the Extension Service continue to develop its program along separate age and sex lines, or will it recognize this need for one agency that will work with the family as a unit to bring its members together as a planning, fun-seeking group--providing opportunities for the development of each individual, within the framework of the family circle? We have done a good job of working separately with farm men, homemakers, 4-H girls, 4-H boys, older youth, and we have even started working with special groups of the aged. We could, if we would, work as effectively with the family as a unit.

The Extension Service has a unique opportunity to help mobile families find roots in new communities. The previous speaker has pointed out the minimal participation of urban folk in community affairs. No organization is now assuming responsibility for helping the family to feel at home in the new community, to take part in local activities, to become interested in local issues. The Extension Service, if it will, can contribute effectively to the integration of new families into community living by an earnest effort to absorb them, as families, and as individuals, with special talents and interests, into community enterprises. In the same manner, we can help the rapidly growing group of senior citizens, many of whom constitute single person families, become and remain an integral part of the community. Several organizations are concerned with the entertainment of this group--witness the rapid growth of the Golden Age Clubs around the country. Much as older folk like to visit with their peers; they have a greater need to be useful to society. The Extension Service, dependent as it is upon volunteer leadership from local communities, is in a position to render a significant service by locating and using many of these talented and interested citizens as resource people or local leaders.

This morning I have mentioned six opportunities open now for Extension to focus its program on a good life for the family.

We can re-orient our approach so we help families study a total problem in relation to their individual family goals.

We can re-direct part of our program for low income families.

We can shift some of the emphasis from production and marketing to helping all families, urban and rural, with problems of consumption.

We can direct a larger share of the Extension program to work with the family as a unit, as well as with separate age and sex groups.

We can help rural and urban families study and discuss together public problems.

We can help the families who move about, and our older citizens, to become integrated with the communities where they are residing.

Admittedly, these seem to me, from my bias, to be significant opportunities. Each of you will think of many more. We can continue our Extension program along the lines that have been so successful through the years, or we can be alert to and take advantage of the many opportunities that are thrown our way for greater service.

A mother was surprised one evening to hear her little boy fall out of bed. She rushed upstairs to ask him what had happened--for this had never occurred before. As he sat on the floor, rubbing his eyes, he said in a very puzzled voice, "I guess Mom, I fell asleep too near where I climbed in." I trust that those of us with the responsibility for the direction of Extension programs in the days ahead will be challenged with the many possibilities open to us for enlarged areas of service, and will not fall asleep "too near where we climbed in."



